



The Intellectual Roots of CaseNEX

In recent years, researchers have explored directly the effectiveness of CaseNEX instruction for teachers. Our vision of case-based work, however, emerged originally from two streams of scientific investigation: (1) the study of individual differences and (2) process-product research.

Individual Differences

No single approach to teaching or learning will work equally well with all people for all objectives. This maxim applies to learners of any age in virtually any field of study. Individuals are said to “interact” with educational environments in different ways yielding learning that varies across people in both quantity and quality.

With the publication of Aptitudes and Instructional Methods in 1977, Stanford researchers Cronbach and Snow ignited a search for statistical evidence of interactions between learners and educational approaches. The basic idea was to reject the shopworn, inaccurate view that effective teaching was some kind of “magic” that could be conjured up to defeat educational failure of any shape or size. Instead, people in disparate fields of study—medicine, management, economics, counseling, psychology, and so forth—began to seek information on how to “adapt” or “differentiate” treatments to enhance people’s chances for success.

In 1981, McNergney in Virginia and Carrier at the University of Minnesota translated ideas on interaction into a book entitled Teacher Development. Their concept of “teacher development” was one that matched professional education to teachers’ needs and abilities and to the multiplicity of tasks, personal and professional, that teachers face on the job. They argued that teachers, just as other learners, could not reasonably be expected to learn in homogenized programs—studying the same content, in the same way, at the same points in their lives—and be prepared to help learners succeed.

Teacher development had to be “fitted” to the many different people who called themselves “teacher” and to the challenges they would encounter in their work. This realization stimulated the creation of teacher education curricula marked by several critical attributes: individualized, concerned for the developmental needs of learners, attentive to contemporaneous events in learners’ lives, amenable to high interactivity, and above all focused on providing practical value.

This no-one-best-way-to-educate-all-teachers view of educational leadership reflected an early and abiding concern for the dignity of the individual and for her or his knowledge of practice. This constant guided our work in the early days, while some basic tenets of teaching and learning provided conditions for the germination of a view that would eventually grow into the CaseNEX approach.

Process-product Research

Process-product research in education emerged in post-WWII America from empirical efforts to identify links between teaching (process) and student learning (product). It was a reaction to years of fruitless investigation, which consisted largely of trying to identify “good” teachers by correlating teacher characteristics with supervisors’ ratings of teachers and with students’ test scores. In contrast, process-product researchers brought principles of science and behavioral engineering to bear on classroom interactions. They described teachers’ behaviors in classrooms through direct observations and students’ products as measures of short- and long-term learning, connecting the two through both correlational and experimental methods. Their intent—unlike the intent of individual differences researchers—was to identify general-effects models of practice that might be expected to work with all learners, regardless of the variability among them.

In 1988, McNergney edited a book (Guide to Classroom Teaching) based on this research, which served as the foundation for the Virginia teacher certification system—a system of classroom observation developed by a team of researchers at the University of Virginia. The book was purchased by the State and given to all beginning teachers for six years. As a compendium of research results written for an audience of practitioners, the book guided teachers to behave in ways that were likely to yield student learning.

While not rigidly prescriptive, the connection between teaching processes and student products is made explicit in CaseNEX methods today. Instructors in case sessions draw attention to both in steps four (Formulating Actions) and five (Predicting Consequences) of the analysis process. CaseNEX sessions are not conversations where anything is acceptable, but purposeful exchanges meant to move participants toward the formulation of teaching actions and the assessment of consequences, or the results of such actions. What teaching action might you take in a particular situation, and how might you know if it is likely to work? Those using CaseNEX methods would want to answer this question in part by considering what research suggests about effective teaching and by using various types of data on student learning as estimates of mastery. Our view of professional practice is one where a teacher considers his or her effects on learners, both early and often, using such information to improve practice.

Linking Research and Practice

CaseNEX enjoys a certain advantage by its association with the University of Virginia and with the research community at large. The founders continue to serve as faculty at the University of Virginia actively engaged in research that stretches across the University and beyond. For instance, they are part of the effort to unite faculty in arts and sciences with faculty in education and in the public schools to explore the value added to K-12 education via the preparation of teachers. This work is funded by the Carnegie Corporation and Ford and Annenberg Foundations. They are also directing research funded by the Spencer Foundation to explore the decisions administrators make in hiring teachers.